UNITED NATIONS **E**

Economic and Social Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/1999/NGO/38
29 January 1999

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Fifty-fifth session
Item 17 d) of the provisional agenda

PROMOTION AND PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS: SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT

Written statement submitted by North-South XXI, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council Resolution 1996/31.

[11 January 1999]

GE.99-10722 (EXT)

Agribusiness innovations: where are the rights?

1. A process of accelerated concentration is being developed in the field of agribusiness which is decisive for the populations, some of whom continue to suffer from hunger.

2. American law and a European Union directive have admitted "transgenetic" innovations on living species (animals and plants) for the sole profit of major agribusiness companies (American and European), conferring on them biotechnological monopolies that could take a heavy toll on people's food supply.

3. This monopolistic concentration of food production worldwide risks making "the food weapon" the absolute weapon of the twenty-first century, on the sole pretext of capitalist economic logic ("the innovations call for sizeable resources, and investments would not be feasible if they were unprofitable ...").

4. "The right to patent" these agribusiness innovations threatens both the effective exercise of the right to health (these innovations become inescapable under pressure from lobbies) and to equal access to scientific information and know-how which affect the enforcement of economic and social rights

5. The Commission on Human Rights is justified in restoring to its agenda the notion of "common heritage of mankind", which originated with the Conference on the Law of the Sea, and in enabling all peoples - who are, after all, interdependent - to benefit from innovations. The exceptional scope of the question of this "right to patent" agribusiness innovations, which is incompatible with the promotion of economic and social rights, warrants the establishment of a working group. Otherwise, the extension of this "right to patent" to innovations relating to the human genome would confer monopoly control of genetic information on a few Powers and possibly lead to discrimination which is particularly dangerous for human rights. The working group should be entrusted with the task of looking it an international regulation for the protection of human rights, banning the patenting of certain innovations and placing them under public control.